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ALUMNI LECTURE



The Mission and Message
of the Church

BY

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No one who is interested in the work of the Christian Church can be satisfied either with its past achievements or its present condition. Not that great things have not been accomplished but that far greater ones ought to have been accomplished in 1900 years.

We do not forget that Jesus likened the growth of his kingdom to leaven in the meal—a process by which each particle would be transformed, and become an active agent in the transformation of other particles until the whole was leavened.

This implies a vast number of individuals, and long reaches of time, since individuals, unlike the passive particles of meal, were capable of resistance, and might not consent to transmit the power even if they yielded to it themselves. In a multitude of cases they do not. The transformation ceases with them because they care less about giving than receiving. They are satisfied if they can make their own calling and election sure, little realizing how far from sure it is! The world is full of quitters “dead ends,” because the current does not get by them. The truth is they are not wholly transformed, or the current

would get by. This is why the kingdom of God advances so slowly. But too often the Gospel has been so presented as to make salvation seem a purely personal matter, to be had and held by the individual, regardless of his relations to anyone else.

Yet Jesus dared to attempt the most gigantic task ever conceived of, the redemption of the world from sin, including every form of selfishness, the emancipation of each soul from bondage, its advancement in holiness, and its final and complete self-realization. Nothing less than this would satisfy either his mind or his heart. He wanted the best possible thing for everybody.

If this achievement was at first associated with the idea of the early return of Jesus it is not strange that that expectation should soon fade away. If the gospel was to be preached to all nations, and the work continued "Until every knee should bow, and every tongue confess Jesus as Lord to the glory of God the Father," many centuries must pass before the end sought could be realized, if that end depended upon the co-operation of men.

Now it is perfectly obvious to us that Jesus' great aim of bringing all men into the kingdom of God could not be accomplished by any single instrumentality. As a matter of fact there are many agencies by which the object is being promoted. Yet it goes without saying that the chief agency is the Christian Church, taken as whole. No other organization can compare with it, nor does any other organization so directly attempt it.

Yet at the very outset we must distinguish between the Church as a means and the Kingdom of God as an end! Jesus had little or nothing to say about "Church," but the "Kingdom" was forever on his lips and in his heart. Only twice do we find any reference

to the Church in the Gospels "Go tell it to the Church," and "On this rock will I build my Church," while there are nearly a hundred references to the "Kingdom."

Yet men have so greatly misunderstood Jesus as to have identified the means with the end, giving the same meaning to both terms, fancying that the Church was synonymous with the Kingdom of God and believing that membership in one was a guarantee of membership in the other.

And so we have the familiar hymn—

"I love Thy Kingdom Lord,
The house of Thine abode,
The Church our blest Redeemer saved
With his own precious blood."

As if the Church and the Kingdom were the same thing, and once a member of the Church one's status were complete, and nothing remained but to build up the Church, as if that were an end in itself, instead of an agency by and through which a greater thing would be brought into existence.

The Church and the Kingdom have indeed, things in common, yet as an organization the Church is a temporary affair, no matter how long it lasts, and will be entirely dispensed with when the Kingdom of God has been established.

"I saw no temple therein," says the author of the Book of Revelation, "for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it." The relation of the Church to the Kingdom is that of John the Baptist to Jesus. "He must increase," said John, "but I must decrease." And the Church must decrease to the vanishing point by and by. But that will be its glory, to make way for something better. Yet multitudes have regarded the Church as permanent, and worked for

their branch of it as if they were building up something which would endure forever, magnifying an institution instead of using it as an agency for bringing in the Kingdom.

How infinitely pathetic is the sight of those, who in a sense, have labored in vain, spending their strength in the interest of their ecclesiastical leaders, who have used them for their own glory instead of showing them what great things they might have done for themselves, and for others, had they wrought in the Church for the Kingdom.

One recalls the words of the young Abbott in Kingsley's "Hypatia," who stopped by stern rebuke any attempt to revile either heretic or heathen, saying, "On the Catholic Church alone, lies the blame of all heresy and unbelief, for if she were but for one day what she ought to be, the world would be converted before nightfall." This, of course, is an extravagant statement. Yet it shows very clearly how men may blunder in magnifying an agency instead of using it for the benefit of others. Another quotation from "Hypatia" might be added—the Warning to Cyril of Alexandria: "I advise you take care lest while you are busy trying to establish God's Kingdom, you forget what it is like, by shutting your eyes to those of its laws which are established already. I have no doubt that with your holiness' great powers you will succeed in establishing something. My only dread is that when it is established you should discover to your horror that it is the devil's kingdom and not God's."

And just here we may draw attention to the difference in the requirements for membership in the Church and the Kingdom!

To join the Church one must submit to baptism, and assent to a creed, formulated by others, perhaps centuries ago. That is, there is a ritualistic and a

theological prerequisite to membership in the Church, which is not required for membership in the Kingdom. Though in some denominations these conditions are not insisted upon, and in others the requirement is less stringent than formerly. Yet multitudes have thus been kept out of the Church who undoubtedly found admission to the Kingdom of Heaven. This has meant a serious loss to the Church by denying it the services of those who might have rendered great assistance.

The failures and follies of the Church are only too obvious and many there be who love to dilate upon them. That, however, is not our task, nor is there any need of railing accusation. For the Church is no worse and no better than the men who comprise its membership. We of the present are not responsible for its good or its evil. But we are responsible for the use which we make of it as an agency for bringing in the kingdom of God,—provided we are allowed to enter it and emphasize this as its chief function.

For many think of the church primarily as conferring benefits upon them rather than affording them the means of conferring the same kind of benefits upon others. Both results should be accomplished, getting and giving. Yet when one only receives and neglects to give, the church fails in its efficiency, so far as he is concerned, since the test of its value will ever be found in the willingness of its members to work for their fellowmen. The command of Jesus is still in force,—“Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.”

If the church is not doing that it ought to be able to say why it has suspended one of its most important activities, and furthermore, explain to the waiting world, why it should be called a “Church”, instead of a “Club” while those activities are suspended.

It is true, that, organized as it is, with a history reaching over the past, it may accomplish other results, but they should be secondary to this, its great mission, of bringing in the Kingdom of God. It were impossible, it seems to me, to overestimate this point.

Yet some will tell us that the chief function of the Church is to safeguard the truth,—for how can it accomplish its mission without proclaiming its message?

It must, indeed, proclaim the truth, and must know it in order to proclaim it. But it does know it, and always has known it. The essentials of its message are as simple as the mission of the Church itself.

It was not necessary to make the Church the custodian of all truth in order to create an agency for the dissemination of some truth.

As an agency for bringing in of the Kingdom of God it is not competent for the very different task it has assumed of conserving truth in general.

If that were its function it has lamentably failed in its performance since, it has not, and could not, as a whole, keep pace with modern progress.

It is too conservative for that high task. Much truth knocks at its door in vain. It is timid where it should be bold and selfish where it should be generous.

For,

“God sends His teachers unto every age,
To every clime, and every race of men,
With revelations fitted to their growth
And shape of mind, nor gives the realm of truth
For to the selfish rule of one sole race.”

The Church ought to recognize the service rendered to religion by other faiths than its own, and ought as gladly to honor the men who anywhere and everywhere have widened and enriched our vision of life, giving us for example, in the philosophy of develop-

ment, a better understanding of the Universe, "illuminating in us what hitherto was dark."

Time enough has passed since the death of Darwin to have transformed the bogey of evolution into a benediction for every thoughtful mind.

There is no organization on earth which is comprehensive enough to conserve the interests of truth in general. That task must be left to mankind as a whole. Every organization deals with some truth, no organization with all truth.

It is because the Church has claimed so much and accomplished so little in the way of conserving the truth that multitudes of most excellent people have held themselves aloof. And these people are not irreligious. "On the contrary judged by any fair test of life they include the best among us."

Twenty years ago John Burroughs said that these men included probably four-fifths of the literary men of this country and Great Britain; a large proportion of journalists and editors; half the lawyers; a large percentage of the teachers, and a larger percentage of business men."

If this was true then it is still more true today. Galsworthy tells us "that not one Englishman in ten now really believes that he is going to live again."

What has the Church done, as a conservator of the truth to combat this error?

"Time was," says Dr. McConnell, "when the task of the Church was to win bad men: now the task is to win the good ones." But it can neither retain them, nor secure others from the outside if it refuses to adjust itself to modern thought, and clings to ancient beliefs and forms of worship, which however useful in the past, do not satisfy the needs of the present.

For the Church is not a theological Antiquarian Society, but an agency in the hands of each succeeding

generation for bringing in the Kingdom of God,—and that object must ever be kept in view.

It is a perversion of its function to magnify dogma, and insist that they only can use the Church as an instrument of service who accept its ancient theology.

The only alternative to such narrowness would be the creation of one more denomination in which the conditions of membership should be the same as those of the Kingdom of God!

The function of the Church is not to emphasize dogma, whether old or new, but to make God real to the mind and heart of man, not merely as an object of thought, but as a personal friend and helper, and through faith in Him to interest men in their own and each others spiritual development, in comparison with which everything else in which man is engaged, however important, is relatively insignificant.

Rightly understood the work of the Church is so vital to the welfare of man that no effort should be spared to win the largest possible co-operation. They who have that work at heart ought to be willing to make almost any concessions in order to bring otherwise like minded people together for a common ministry to the deepest needs of man.

For what is more important for anyone than to know God, and do His will?

It is here that we touch the second part of our topic, "The Mission and Message of the Church."

If its mission is to bring in the Kingdom of God, the question is How will it accomplish that object?

I am not particularly concerned about defining the Kingdom of God." We shall know more about that by and by when we are prepared for its enjoyment.

It is enough to know that it is sure of realization because God is behind it,—God and man.

It will be a kind of spiritualized democracy, in which every man will come to his own, no one lording it over

his brother, but each, loving and being loved, shall find no difficulty in serving and being served.

The important question for us now is, How is the Kingdom being realized? And the answer is,—First, by making the Head of that Kingdom, the Invisible God, real to the mind and heart of man, showing that God can exist and be our friend even if He be obliged, on our account, to remain in the background.

Greatly as we long, at times, for a demonstration of the reality of His existence He cannot give it without impairing our freedom.

For the present, at least, we must walk by faith, or we shall develop no strength of our own.

If it be hard for us to have faith in an Invisible God it is matched by His faith in our ability to do without a demonstration.

Jesus had to meet the same test. He too must walk by faith, nor could He better reveal God to us than by His own faith in man,—not shrinking from any suffering which came to him in the performance of duty, but going the whole length of loyalty even unto death, and so appealing to men as to win their acceptance of his leadership.

And in making God real to men the Church does something for God which He is restrained from doing for Himself, since He must ever be an unobtrusive God.

We may help each other to a faith in Him, while He can at present do nothing to compel our faith, because that would spoil everything.

He does, indeed, manifest Himself in Nature, and in our own souls, yet He does not obtrude Himself upon us in such a way as to compel belief. He does not come to us as to Adam and Eve in the garden in the cool of the day.

No one has seen God at any time, yet this is the high and splendid function of the Church to make the In-

visible God real to man, and through that sense of reality to make His character and will dominant so that the Kingdom of God may increasingly be realized.

And here is something which is big enough to command the interest of all men, no matter what other objects may engage their attention, art, science, philosophy—or any other pursuit. Religion should be every man's supreme interest.

And as no kingdom can exist without members it would seem to be obvious that we, who are subjects of redemption, and who call God our Father in Heaven, should constitute the membership of that kingdom, which already is, and which will never cease to be.

Now nothing is harder to believe than that God, whom we think of as knowing us perfectly could be satisfied to be incompletely known by us, as He must be while we live here on earth.

We may never know Him perfectly but a future life is clearly necessary not only to our further development, but in order that God may more fully disclose Himself to His own children.

For He never could be satisfied either with what we are today, or with our present knowledge of Himself. He must have an infinite yearning not only to be understood by us, but also to reproduce Himself in us. He cannot be satisfied with making things, worlds, and their contents.

And we are the more sure of this because the defect of our knowledge concerning Him relates to His character! For we have been dreadfully misinformed concerning Him.

Only a God of infinite patience could tolerate what has been thought and said about Himself even down to the present time.

We have been told all manner of evil things, about Him,—that He was partial, jealous, vindictive; that

He had the passions of men like the Gods of the Grecian mythology, who only differed from men in being more powerful, that is, they exercised control over others, but could not control themselves.

And God was thought of as imperfect, defective, for that is what it amounts to, if what we have been told were true, namely, that He had assumed such an attitude towards men as required the death of Christ on the Cross to make Him gracious and forgiving. But if God could be made gracious in this way, or in any way, He was not good enough already!

It is our theology which is in fault and not the God of all goodness and grace, of inexhaustible good will for all mankind.

Jesus could add nothing to, nor take anything from God. He could only reveal Him as He was.

The death of Jesus was essential to his own completeness, but not in any sense to God's completeness. It simply showed us how complete God was, as a loving and suffering God. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself.

A friend wrote me the other day saying, "We owe everything to Jesus Christ." My reply was that we owe everything, including Jesus, to God the Father Almighty. The greatest service which Jesus rendered to the world was to make us sure of God.

And the message of the Church concerning God is that He is real and gracious, infinitely attractive because He expresses in Himself all that it is possible for man ever to achieve.

Take, for example, a single moral quality—self control, which stands out with amazing splendor in the character of God. For God were nothing if not master of Himself.

Our stability depends upon His inflexibility. Knowing what we do of Him, and of His relation to the

Universe, we should be filled with consternation if we knew that but for one moment He had relaxed His demands upon Himself, and been guilty of any form of self indulgence.

For if He could do it once He could do it again, in which case He would cease to be God, as we conceive Him, and we would cease to be safe from Him!

We should be in jeopardy every hour, nay every moment. Verily, our stability does depend upon His inflexibility.

Yet according to Grecian mythology the Gods were constantly guilty of self indulgence. Read your Homer again, and see how far we have come in our thought concerning God since those bad days. We are secure from evil except the evil which we inflict upon ourselves, and the evil which is incidental to a world like this, because of the demands which God is able to make upon Himself, His ability to resist evil, and persist in what is good.

We differ from God because we are in the process of becoming, while He has already arrived, at least in the sense of being incapable of evil or folly.

There will be a constant forthputting of energy on His part and therefore an eternal progress even in God.

We have only just begun our development, and can hope to succeed in becoming like God only by knowing what God is like.

Hence the importance of right ideas concerning Him. Surely nothing is more important for man than that he should know God.

This constitutes the supreme advantage which Jesus had over other men. He had acquired such knowledge of God through the obedience of faith that he was incalculably rich in spite of what he lacked in other respects, material possessions and the like.

The rich young man who turned away from Jesus because he could not relinquish his wealth was pitifully poor in comparison, dependent upon his shekels when he might have had the companionship of the Son of God.

This, then, is the first item with the message of the Church,—that God is, and that He is good and great; that He is adequate to all that He undertakes, that He has a purpose of grace in connection with the development of His children, which though requiring their co-operation cannot be defeated because, sooner or later, their co-operation will be obtained.

“Nothing walks with aimless feet;
Not one life shall be destroyed,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete.”

We may not solve the mystery of foreordination and freewill, yet no one can believe that God would start something which He could not finish.

There was one unforgettable lecture of Professor Fisher's in this Seminary forty years ago in which he demonstrated to the satisfaction of my classmates that there was no causal efficiency in fore-knowledge: that God's knowledge of how we would act did not interfere with our freedom.

We could do as we pleased in the exercise of that freedom, yet we could not escape the consequences of our acts, and in the long run God would triumph by virtue of our consent and co-operation. He knew this in advance, but His knowledge did not interfere with our freedom. Our freedom was real, and though grossly misused, would ultimately lead us to choose the right.

A second item in the message of the Church is the obligation which man owes to his fellowman, which

has been disregarded on such a gigantic scale in this present war.

The obligation is as old as Man himself. For each man is his brother's keeper. No man lives unto himself, or can, if he lives normally.

Yet it is abnormal living, or the neglect of what we owe to each other that causes all our woe. And at this point the Church, in its organized capacity, terribly failed at this present struggle by uttering no protest, holding up no ideal, but giving the impression that it had no program, and was neutral even in thought.

Individuals, both ministers and laymen, did protest. Indeed it were but true to say that the moral sense of the nation was shocked, outraged by the invasion of Belgium and the outrages which followed. But the Church, in its organized capacity, gave no sign. It uttered no challenge, but stood by marking time while millions of men flung themselves in mad violence against each other, in blind disregard of what they owed to one another.

It was a resort to force to accomplish what from the standpoint of Christianity was hideously and villainously wrong.

It came to pass because those who claimed the right to rule were themselves lacking at the very quality of self-control, which, had they possessed it, would have made them willing to serve their weaker brethren rather than conquer and rule them.

Had the Church kept sounding in men's ears their obligation to love and serve each other, to promote in every possible way the general welfare, by the extension of education, the exercise of social justice, its conscience, at least, would have been clear and its influence enormous.

But apparently the duty of man to man was too obvious for frequent repetition, and the Church con-

cerned itself with its own affairs, when it was not the ally of the party in power, as in Germany.

It went on emphasizing its right to existence in its divided condition, Protestantism broken up into fragments, each as good or as bad as the other; the evangelicals pointing the finger of scorn at the others; Catholics saying that there was no salvation for Protestants: all bodies alike ignoring what they owed of sympathy and good will to each other as separate groups of fellowmen, who talked about theology instead of practising religion.

What wonder that the outsider should say with scorn, What fools these Christians be!

Once, in an age of persecution it was said, How these Christians love each other!

That could not be said today in the divided condition of the Church.

Nor can men, so lacking in sympathy for one another, so intent upon their individual rights, effectively use their own organization as an instrument for bringing in the Kingdom of God.

Yet right here the Church could find the greatest opportunity which it has had since the Reformation. For if the world can unite in vast federations, millions of men of different races and nations fighting for the liberty of man, why cannot the Churches of our land find a basis of unity, and a fellowship of spirit in which to conduct their common work?

How significant it is that such multitudes of men,—with no formal connection with the Christian Church—should yet have been equal to the supreme sacrifice, not counting their lives as precious in their own sight,—nor staggered by the experience of appalling suffering.

How is the Church to relate itself to those, outside of its membership, who yet measure up to the most exacting standards?

Surely it has not wrought in vain when so many testify by their lives to what the Church has proclaimed as essential in conduct.

But if men outside of the Church are ready to make such heroic sacrifices, what guarantee will the Church give that she is worthy of her own high calling?

What sacrifices will she make in order to be worthy of the Gospel she proclaims?

A third item in the message of the Church is faith in the life everlasting.

For if what Mr. Galsworthy says is true even of the Englishmen of his acquaintance, that not one man in ten really believes that he will live again, it is high time for the Church to give the reason for its faith in this article of its Creed.

For it makes an immense difference to a man whether he believes that he is going to the scrapheap or to his father's house.

No small share of the immense slaughter of this war has been due to the supposed worthlessness of multitudes of lives, which were thought to be of no account to God or man.

And, indeed, if death ends all,—why should men consent to live in misery, as millions of men are obliged to today? If the house smokes why stay in it—and choke?

But if life reaches beyond death,—and continues forever because God has a purpose of grace for all of His children it is highly important for us to know it,—at any rate, to believe it.

Not that the reality of the future life depends upon one's belief in that possibility. For someone might be planning to leave you a fortune the enjoyment of which, when it came, would not in the least depend upon your anticipation of it,—yet if you knew that it were coming the prospect of its enjoyment would greatly influence your life today.

Moreover, if life goes on forever, and no one can possibly escape from himself, it is a matter of primary importance for everyone to decide what sort of a man he will be.

If Judas Iscariot could not endure the thought of living after he had betrayed his Lord, and at the same time could not escape living on the other side of death, the problem for him was not the one he tried to meet by going out and hanging himself, but by making amends for the awful blunder he had made, and thereby adjusting himself to the life which was sure to go on both here and hereafter!

He confessed his fault to the high priest, when he threw down the silver and said I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. But he made his confession to the wrong party!

Yet sooner or later everyone must confess his short comings. For it is simply a question of fact whether he has used his freedom as he should, or has misused it.

The misuse of one's freedom constitutes one's punishment, and necessitates a future life, since more time is needed both for punishment and for restoration than is supplied within the brief limits of an earthly life.

The heart cries out for vengeance against those who were responsible for the measureless sufferings of this awful war. That is God's problem.

"Vengeance is mine,"

"I will repay"—saith the Lord.

There is a lot of comfort in that last phrase, I will repay.

Yet something more is needed than punishment. God's ultimate problem is restoration. For evil can never be conquered by punishment alone. Might does not make right either in God or man.

Force will finally be on the side of right because the time must come when no one will choose to use force for what is wrong.

Some would tell us that God can suppress evil by force alone, that is, by superior force, crushing life out of the evil doer as a Prussianized Germany seeks to destroy the freedom of mankind.

But that would be a defeat for God rather than an overthrow of wickedness! He must accomplish His object in some other way, because wickedness is personal to the individual. It is part of his mind and heart and will.

It is seated within the man. And God's problem is to get rid of the evil,—punishing it indeed, but saving the man!

He can only do that by inducing the man to change his attitude towards evil, repudiating it altogether, loathing it, and wondering how he could ever have been such a fool as to have been duped and deceived by it!

Hating evil, as we do, when we suffer from it at the hands of others—as we are suffering now—we cry out to God against it, and wish that He would exterminate the evil doers root and branch, forgetting that we are evil doers ourselves, that no one is righteous no not one. If God needs more time than this life affords for eliminating evil from the “best of us” He certainly needs more time for the elimination of evil from the “worst of us”, nor can He ever be satisfied in a universe of free moral agents, until every last one of them repudiates everything which is evil, and seeks only that which is good.

A future life, therefore, is necessary for the continuing development of our souls in order that God's gracious purpose may be realized.

If in this life we live and learn we shall keep up the process in the life to come, until at length we shall be

such masters of ourselves that we shall live wholly according to reason and to love.

Why, then, not begin at once, and why should not the Christian Church address itself to the supreme task of helping men to accomplish this result?

It can do so,—first by making God real, second, by making men understand their relationship to each other, and their infinite value in the Sight of God; third, by assuring them that the life which begins here in the flesh goes on forever with no escape from the obligation of living it worthily.

God, brotherhood and immortality are the three great realities which present themselves to the mind of man.

If the Church will utter itself as it can and should concerning these realities it will do its part in preparing mankind for the Kingdom of God, which, beginning on earth, will find its ever enlarging development in the life which is to come.

And if the life here is only the prelude to that age-long and infinite career, the Church, having performed its task, can well rejoice that its work is over, because a bigger and better thing shall have come to pass.

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